

African-Americans in Montana Timeline

| | | | | |
|---|---|-----------|---|---|
| | | 1805 | ➤ | York, member of the Corps of Discovery & Clark's slave servant, is most likely the first person of African descent to enter what will later become Montana Territory |
| Americans establish the first fur trading post in MT | ◀ | 1807 | ➤ | Mountain man Edward Rose spends the winter trading with the Crow at the behest of Manuel Lisa who later builds Montana's first fur fort on the Yellowstone River |
| First fur trade rendezvous | ◀ | 1825 | ➤ | Free trapper James P. Beckwourth arrives in Montana as part of William Ashley's fur trading expedition |
| Smallpox epidemic kills many MT Indians | ◀ | 1837-1840 | | |
| Father DeSmet builds St. Mary's Mission near present-day Stevensville | ◀ | 1841 | | |
| American Fur Co. builds Ft. Benton on the Upper Missouri River deep in Blackfeet country | ◀ | 1846 | | |
| | | 1856 | ➤ | "Written from his own dictation to T.D. Bonner", The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth: Mountaineer, Scout, Pioneer and Chief of the Crow Nation of Indians is published in New York |
| First steamboat arrives in Ft. Benton | ◀ | 1860 | ➤ | American Fur Co.'s post at Ft. Benton employs at least four Black men; other Blacks arrive as steamboat crew & passengers |
| Civil War begins | ◀ | 1861 | | |
| * Congress passes the Homestead Act | ◀ | 1862 | | |
| * Montana gold rush begins | | | | |
| Emancipation Proclamation frees forever "...all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States..." | ◀ | 1863 | | |
| Montana Territory is created | ◀ | 1864 | | |
| * Civil War ends | ◀ | 1865 | | |
| * 13th Amendment abolishing slavery is passed | | | | |
| | | 1866 | ➤ | * Haitian-born barber Samuel Lewis settles in Bozeman where he erects several business buildings & his own home, now on the National Register of Historic Places |
| | | | | * Sammy Hays is murdered by "an Irish Democrat named Lynch" in a fractious post-election riot in Helena |
| 15th Amendment granting Black men the right to vote in U.S. elections | ◀ | 1870 | ➤ | 183 Blacks living in Montana Territory (20,595 total population); 43% reside in Helena with |

| | | | |
|--|---|--------|---|
| | | | 10.4% & 8.9% residing in Virginia City & Ft. Benton, respectively |
| | | 1872 ➤ | Montana Territorial Legislature passes a law reading: "The education of children of African descent shall be provided for in separate schools..."; it is rescinded in 1883 |
| Panic of 1873 brings nation's economy to a near standstill | ◀ | 1873 ➤ | Deer Lodge resident America Turner receives notice from Granville Stuart & fellow school district directors that her son "is not entitled to a place in the public school....he will not be admitted..." |
| | | 1876 ➤ | Isaiah Dorman, a U.S. Army interpreter , is killed at the Battle of the Little Big Horn |
| | | 1877 ➤ | Charles "Smoky" Wilson is hired as a Crow language field interpreter at Ft. Custer & later serves in various federal government capacities at Crow Agency for the remainder of his life |
| | | 1879 ➤ | Mattie Bost marries white freighter John Castner in Helena; they reportedly build the first cabin in Belt which evolves into a hotel, restaurant & stage station; she later operates a cattle ranch |
| First train enters Montana Territory | ◀ | 1880 ➤ | 346 Blacks living in Montana Territory (39,159 total population) |
| | | 1881 ➤ | William Woodcock, the U.S. Marshal's servant, sues a Butte restaurant under the 1875 Civil Rights Act after he believes its proprietor asks him to leave; he wins the suit in 1883 & is awarded \$500, the minimum settlement |
| | | 1882 ➤ | Ft. Benton's Grand Union hotel opens with an 11-person staff, nine of whom are Black & work as the barkeeper, cooks, waiters & chambermaid |
| * Northern Pacific completes its transcontinental route through Montana Territory | ◀ | 1883 | |
| * Many members of northern Montana tribes die during Starvation Winter | | | |
| * Copper boom begins in Butte | | | |
| | | 1885 ➤ | Internationally-acclaimed Jubilee Singers, students from Nashville's black Fisk University, perform their classical arrangements of "plantation melodies" in the White Sulphur Springs skating rink; in earlier years the troupe visited Butte, Dillon, Miles City, & Helena where "the shop windows of Main Street are ornamented with the pictures of the various members..." |
| | | 1886 ➤ | Helena's African-American community celebrates the anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the West Indies (1834) & the United States, white stockman Dan Floweree donates \$50 to the celebration, the city's mayor & other |

| | | | |
|--|------|---|--|
| | | | white citizens also attend the day-long festivities (August 2) |
| | 1887 | ➤ | Abolitionist/daguerreotypist/entrepreneur from Cincinnati & Minneapolis, J.P. Ball, Sr. opens a photography studio in Helena, serves on the Lewis & Clark County Republican Party central committee, president of the state's Afro-American Club, & is a co-founder of St. James' African Methodist-Episcopal Church |
| | 1888 | ➤ | St. James' African Methodist-Episcopal (AME) church organizes in Helena & becomes the nucleus of Black Helenans' social & cultural life |
| Montana Territory becomes the 41st state admitted to the Union | 1889 | ➤ | White Sulphur Springs' "colored" brass marching band debuted "on Main street and plays several tunes after which they visited the houses of the colored people of town." (September) |
| | 1890 | ➤ | * 1,490 Blacks living in Montana (142,924 total population) |
| | | | * Great Falls residents organize Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, its original church building was constructed the next year & replaced in 1917; the present building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2003 |
| | 1892 | ➤ | Missoulian William Waller, divorced in 1888 from his white wife, Nellie, applies to District Court for custody of their two young daughters alleging their mother "is not a proper person to care for the children", the outcome of the case is not known |
| Panic of 1893 devastates the state's silver-mining industry, nearly one-third of Montanans lose their jobs as banks fail & mines close | 1893 | ➤ | * On their wedding night in Glendive, Emma Wall & her white groom, John Orr, are forcibly "alabastined" & ebonized, respectively, by a mob of 200 men & given 24 hour notice "to pack up & leave town" |
| | | | * Montana & Illinois Gold Mining Co., probably the first company incorporated by African-Americans in Montana, is founded by the grandiose Charles Porter Grove |
| | | | * US District Judge Hiram Knowles, a white, appoints Libby resident & Montana's first black attorney, John D. Posten as U.S. Commissioner to the District Court, making him the first Black to hold such a position in the region |
| | 1894 | ➤ | * Montana's first newspaper for Blacks, The Colored Citizen, is published in Helena for 2 1/2 months chiefly to advance the city as the location of the state capital among Black male voters |

- * Former slave Annie Morgan settles on an abandoned fox farm near Philipsburg; in 1913 she files a [Homestead Entry](#) for the property she shared with her white common-law husband, Joseph "Fisher Jack" Case, in 2005, the Morgan-Case Homestead was listed on the [National Register of Historic Places](#)
- 1896** ➤ * Following Mary Fields' eviction by Catholic Bishop Brondel from St. Peter's Mission where she'd lived for 11 years, "Stagecoach Mary" begins driving a U.S. Mail stagecoach between the mission & Cascade
- * Afro-American Club of Butte City incorporates "to conduct & manage & carry on the business of a social club & club house...to engage in musical, literary & scientific pursuits..."
- * [Soldiers of the 25th Infantry Regiment](#) stationed at Ft. Missoula bicycle to St. Louis, a distance of approximately 1900 miles in 40 days
- * Former slave, minstrel company member & Kentucky native Robert Canada Logan, a Butte resident, wins second place in the Welsh International Eisteddfod vocal contest, singing before 30,000 people in Denver
- * William Biggerstaff is hanged in Helena for the murder of pugilist Dick Johnson, a Unionville native; J.P. Ball, Sr. takes numerous photographs of Biggerstaff before, during & following the hanging
- 1897** ➤ White Sulphur Springs blacksmith Irvin Smith's 65th birthday is lauded in the Rocky Mountain Husbandman: "...though well advanced in years his strong & sinewy arms still ply with wonderful force..."
- 1900** ➤ * 1,523 Blacks living in Montana (243,329 total population)
- * AME congregation organizes in Billings at 302 North 24th St.
- * Upon the death of her white husband, [Sally Gammon \(Brown\) Bickford](#) assumes ownership of the Virginia City Water Co. & operates it for 31 years
- 1901** ➤ * Cornerstone is laid for Shaffer's Chapel (AME) on southeast corner of Idaho & Platinum Streets, Butte (9 June)
- * Bethel Baptist Church organizes in Butte &

later moves into 217 West Mercury, site of the original AME church

* Afro-American Women's Club founded in Butte, disbands soon afterwards; re-emerges in 1918 as the Pearl Club to support U.S. efforts in World War I

* Vaudeville team Williams & Walker, often credited for developing post-minstrelsy humor, play a 3-night stand at Butte's Sutton New Grand theatre, for "the elite of colored society" & white audiences

1903 ➤ * American-African Church Building League in Anaconda turns over two years' fund-raising proceeds to AME congregation for its first church, a building donated by ACM to be moved to southwest corner of West Commercial & Locust

* President Theodore Roosevelt visits Butte where prospector/orator Charles J. Fiske representing the city's Afro-American residents presents him with a trowel to "continue to spread the cement of human kindness..."

Forest Homestead Act passed by Congress



1906 ➤ Helena resident J.B. Bass publishes first issues of Montana Plaindealer covering local, state & national "race news", the weekly "unhesitatingly subscribe[s] to the principles of Republicanism" & runs for 5 years

1907 ➤ * St. Stephen's AME congregation in Havre remodels a building at 539 Third St. as a church

* A newspaper publisher, printer, private club president & two tailors form the Helena chapter of the National Negro Business League

* Afro-American Building Association incorporated "to purchase real estate & erect a building thereon in the city of Helena..."

* Kentucky native, wife & mother Alice Palmer of Helena is reputedly the first African-American woman in Montana to file for a homestead 5 miles west of Lincoln

* [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) is founded in New York City



1909 ➤ * AME ministers Cate & Abbot visit Lewistown, Livingston & Miles City to start churches

* [Enlarged Homestead Act](#) passed by Congress

* St. James AME Church in Helena is the setting for "Honor Lincoln Day" on the centennial of his birth

* Montana legislature passes law making "Marriage between a white person & negro [sic]

| | | | |
|--|------|---|---|
| | | | utterly null & void"; the law was repealed in 1953 |
| | 1910 | ➤ | * 1,834 Blacks living in Montana (376,053 total population); 23% reside in Helena with 13.9% & 8.1% residing in Butte & Billings, respectively |
| | | | * circa; Missoula's St. Paul's AME Church is located at 1411 (later 1427) Phillips |
| | | | * Second Baptist Church (Ebenezer Mission) in Helena receives blueprints for its \$3,000 building erected at 1260 Harrison Avenue |
| | 1911 | ➤ | Butte's Socialist mayor/Unitarian minister Lewis J. Duncan appoints Frank Cassels to the police force, patrolling Main Street from Park to Granite |
| | 1912 | ➤ | Last Chance Club "is organized [in Helena] for the social improvement among its members, literary & dramatic entertainments & benevolent work among those in need of assistance..." |
| | 1913 | ➤ | * Booker T. Washington , perhaps the most famous African-American of his time, lectures in Billings, Bozeman, Butte & Helena advocating for accommodation between the black & white races |
| | | | * Railway bridge construction camp worker J.C. Collins is lynched in Mondak after killing the Sheridan County sheriff & his deputy who were trying to apprehend him for the alleged assault of a Black fellow worker's wife |
| * Montana women of all races, except Native American , get the right to vote | 1914 | ➤ | * Five Great Falls residents incorporate the Afro-American Investment Co. to engage in real estate dealings |
| * World War I begins | | | * Glendive Independent notes its "sundown town" status: "...for many years there has been a saying that 'the sun is never allowed to set on any n***** in Glendive...'" |
| | 1916 | ➤ | * D.W. Griffith's epic silent film, "Birth of a Nation" , adapted from The Clansman, An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan, plays in Montana movie theatres & protests against its racism occur in Helena & Butte |
| | | | * Arthur C. Ford, the son of U.S. Senator T.C. Power's coachman, graduates from Montana State College with a mechanical engineering degree, as the president of New York City's Department of Water Supply, Gas & Electricity, he was the first Black to be appointed commissioner of a city agency |

| | | | | |
|--|---|------|---|--|
| Drought years begin & end homestead boom | ◀ | 1917 | ➤ | Three Black railroad workers--Leslie Fahley (or Foley), Harrison Gibson & Henry Hall--are hanged in White Sulphur Springs for the murder of a white transient laborer, 4 others were sentenced from 10 years to life imprisonment |
| Fifty percent of MT farmers lose their land over the next 6 years | ◀ | 1919 | | |
| | | 1920 | ➤ | * 1,658 Blacks living in Montana (548,889 total population) * First services held at newly-built Wayman Chapel (AME), 402 South 25th Street, Billings |
| Ku Klux Klan organizes in Montana, their venom is directed more towards the numerous Catholic & immigrant populations than the state's small Black population; "klans" operated in Butte, Livingston, Whitehall, Roundup & other Montana towns | ◀ | 1921 | ➤ | * Montana Federation of Negro Women's Clubs is founded & comprised of clubs from Bozeman, Helena, Billings, Butte, Anaconda, & Kalispell * Missouri native Henry J. Baker is appointed Postmaster at the State Capitol & is believed to be the first African-American state official |
| | | 1922 | ➤ | * Governor Joseph M. Dixon delivers welcome address to second annual convention of the Montana State Federation of Negro Women's Clubs in Helena * Son of a 25th Infantry veteran, Missoulian James Dorsey is the first Black to graduate from the University of Montana, five years later he was the first Black to earn a degree from the U of M Law School; Dorsey practiced law in Milwaukee for nearly 40 years & received a Distinguished Service Award from his alma mater in 1963 |
| | | 1927 | ➤ | Tenor Taylor Gordon , a White Sulphur Springs native, sings spirituals with baritone/pianist J. Rosamond Johnson at Carnegie Hall; he later writes a best-selling memoir, Born to Be, detailing his Montana boyhood, participation in the Harlem Renaissance & advancing critical appreciation of the spiritual as an art form |
| | | 1930 | ➤ | * 1,256 Blacks living in Montana (537,606 total population); 16.6% reside in Great Falls with 12.7% & 11.7% residing in Butte & Helena, respectively * "Colored Walsh for Senator Club" holds rally in Helena for "members & sympathizers" advocating white U.S. Senator Thomas J. Walsh's re-election * 23 year old Kentucky native Eva B. Sallee teaches in the public school in Wisdom |
| * New Deal begins | ◀ | 1933 | ➤ | Nearly 1,000 young Black Civilian Conservation |

* [Going-to-the-Sun Road](#) opens in Glacier National Park

Almost 25% of Montanans rely on government assistance

* Nazi Germany invades Poland

* [Daughters of the American Revolution](#) prohibit contral to Marian Anderson from singing at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C.

Over the next 3 years, the state's population drops 16%

* [US declares war on Japan](#) after it bombs Pearl Harbor; Montanan Jeanette Rankin is the only congressional representative to vote against the declaration

* Germany & Italy declare war on the US

* Federal government establishes internment camps for US citizens of Japanese descent & Japanese residents

* [Airfields constructed](#) near Great Falls, Lewistown, Cut Bank & Glasgow

[Corps enrollees](#) from New York & New Jersey arrive in the Libby/Troy area to build the airport, lookout towers, & the first highways in north Lincoln County; in 1934, however, the CCC's national director orders "all Negroes in camps outside their home states" to be repatriated to their residencies

1934 ➤ Havre resident Alice Pleasant dies; "Ma Plaz" was renowned for her chicken dinners, quick wit & generosity

1935 ➤ * One month after winning the Grizzly Cup as the University of Montana's outstanding overall student-athlete, Naseby Rhinehart accepts a position as athletic trainer at his alma mater & over the next 47 years develops a pioneering athletic trainer curriculum

* Giants of Butte baseball team wins championship of the first half of the Montana State Baseball League split season

1937 ➤ A bill "relating to discrimination between citizens in regard to certain services & employment..." is proposed in the Montana House of Representatives but is killed in committee

1939

1940 ➤ 1,120 Blacks living in Montana (559,456 total population)

1941 ➤ Anaconda newspaper reporter [Edward B. Reynolds](#) contributes essays on smelter work to the unpublished WPA anthology Men at Work; his older brother Rox Reynolds, also a journalist, is a well-known humor essayist for Seattle & San Francisco newspapers

1942 ➤ * Battalion of Southern Black miner-soldiers are furloughed to Butte to augment efforts "to produce to the full [the] quota of copper [necessary] for victory..."; 8,000 white Butte miners subsequently walk out citing safety issues even though the Black soldiers were experienced miners

* Great Falls' African-American population swells as Black airmen & their families are assigned to Malmstrom Air Force Base

1943 ➤ Fort Harrison native & registered nurse Octavia Bridgwater enlists in the Army Nurse Corps & is one of only several hundred Black nurses

| | | | |
|--|---|------|--|
| | | | permitted to serve in the segregated armed forces; she attains the rank of First Lieutenant |
| POW's help harvest Montana's crops | ◀ | 1944 | |
| * Korean War begins | ◀ | 1950 | ➤ 1,232 Blacks living in Montana (591,024 total population) |
| * Great Falls replaces Butte as Montana's largest city | | 1952 | ➤ * Cascade County Community Council appoints the "Inter-racial Committee..." to study the matter of racial discrimination...with particular concern for the colored airmen at the [Malmstrom A.F.] Base & the question of their admittance to establishments in the city..." |
| | | 1953 | ➤ * Executive Secretary of Portland's Urban League conducts a 3-week "intercultural relations" workshop in Billings with the support of the [Jewish] Anti-Defamation League * Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs advocates passage of Montana House Bill 73 to "...guarantee the full & equal enjoyment of all places of public accommodation & amusement..."; critics claim such a law would increase the state's Black population, decrease property values or extend civil rights to Native Americans. The bill does not reach a Senate roll call & dies. * Butte's Pearl Club for women hosts contralto Marian Anderson, over 2,000 attend her concert at the city's Civic Center * After 60 years, Julian Anderson retires from his bartender post at the Montana Club, a private men's club in downtown Helena |
| US Supreme Court outlaws school segregation with Brown v. Topeka Board of Education decision | ◀ | 1954 | |
| Open-pit mining begins in Butte | ◀ | 1955 | |
| | | 1960 | ➤ * 1,467 Blacks living in Montana (674,767 total population) * Russ Williams, Helena High School Class of 1961, is elected to Boys State & believed to have been the first African-American to receive this honor; Senior Class president & a member of the National Honor Society & 3-7-77 honorary, he is killed in a tragic shotgun accident before graduation |
| | | 1962 | ➤ Great Falls' long-lived Ozark Club, renowned for its integrated jazz bands & inter-racial clientele, burns to the ground |
| US Senate Majority Leader Montana's Mike | ◀ | 1964 | |

Mansfield expedites consideration of a bill that would become the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#)

- 1965 ➤ After attacks on peaceful civil rights marchers in Selma, Alabama, Black & white residents of Billings & Missoula hold street marches & ecumenical prayer services noting a "nationwide failure to love one another..."
- 1968 ➤ Professor Ulysses Doss establishes the "Black Studies Program" at U of M, only the third such program in the U.S. & the first outside of California
- 1969 ➤ Ophelia Fenter is the first Black to teach at Butte High School where she teaches home economics for the next 14 years
- 1970 ➤ 1,995 Blacks living in Montana (694,409 total population)
- 1972 ➤
- 1973 ➤ Lewistown native Alma Jacobs is appointed State Librarian; the previous year she co-founded the Montana Committee for the Humanities, in 1957 she was the first Black elected president of the Pacific Northwest Library Association
- 1974 ➤ Geraldine W. Travis of Great Falls is elected to the Montana House of Representatives & becomes the state's first Black legislator
- 1976 ➤
- 1980 ➤ 1,786 Blacks living in Montana (786,690 total population)
- 1990 ➤ 2,381 Blacks living in Montana (799,065 total population)
- 1991 ➤ Montana becomes the 48th state to declare the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. a state holiday
- 1992 ➤ Great Falls chapter of the NAACP hosts a rally on the Civic Center steps to protest the acquittal of Los Angeles police officers charged with beating motorist Rodney King
- 2000 ➤ 2,834 Blacks living in Montana (902,195 total population)
- 2007 ➤ Miles City resident [Johnnie Lockett Thomas](#) receives a 2007 Montana Governor's Humanities Award for her research & presentations on the African-American experience in the West

[Montana adopts new constitution](#)



[Atlantic Richfield Co. purchases the Anaconda Company](#), over the next 7 years, it closes smelters & refineries in Great Falls & Anaconda & ends large-scale mining in Butte



Billings replaces Great Falls as Montana's largest city

